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ABSTRACT

This lesson plan, for grades 4 to 6 and up, incorporates the Dr. Seuss story about Sneetches to teach children about sources of prejudice. The lesson also can be used to incorporate writing in the social studies. Six writing prompts are included. (EH)

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You CAN Teach a Sneetch! Peace Education with Dr. Seuss.

by Irma K. Ghosn

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You CAN teach a Sneetch! Peace education with Dr. Seuss
by Irma K. Ghosn

Text: Dr. Seuss. *Sneetches and Other Stories*
New York: Random House, 1961
Themes: prejudice ; stereotyping
EFL level: intermediate / advanced
Grade level: 4 - 6 +
Grammar: past tense; conditionals & modals (could? could...if); contractions
Writing: change in point of view; narrative; reported speech, etc.
Reading, speaking and listening integrated.

This classic story about where prejudice can lead us works well with almost any age. I have used it in teacher-training to demonstrate writing activities that can be generated from a story, and invariably, the participants have wanted to try the story with their students! The story features Sneetches - the Star-Belly Sneetches who consider themselves superior, and the Plain-Belly Sneetches - and the opportunist McBean who seems to be one to reap the benefits of the situation.

Read the story aloud to the class, using the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DRTA) proposed by Russell Stauffer (1969), stopping every now and then to ask for predictions; *"What do you think will happen now?" "What do you think they will do?" "What makes you think that?"* Validate all predictions and continue reading to find out to what extent predictions were accurate. Do not read the last page, ask the children what they think will happen. List predictions on the board and invite students to justify their suggestions. Then read the conclusion. Compare children's predictions with the author's conclusion.

Lead a discussion on how the Star-Belly Sneetches felt about the Plain-Belly Sneetches and how they showed their feelings. Tell the children that this type of attitude is called prejudice. Have children talk about how they think the Plain-Belly Sneetches felt about the Star-Bellies' attitude and behavior, and how the prejudiced attitudes and stereotyping affected the life of the two groups and the Sneetch community as a whole.

Ask in what ways the Sneetches are like people. If children have difficulty, ask if there are groups of people that other people treat like the Star-Bellies treated the Plain-Bellies.

Children will want to hear the story again, so be prepared to have a variety of listening opportunities. Older students could have been asked earlier to rehearse the story for a presentation to the class. Alternatively, you could have a native speaker read the story with proper expressions on tape, and then you can play the tape at your convenience. Structure the subsequent listening sessions by having students listen for a purpose. Some possibilities are:

When you hear what the Star-Belly Sneetches did when they met some Plain-Bellies, walking on the beach, close your eyes.

Every time you hear the word 'stars', snap your fingers.

Give students index cards with target vocabulary from the story, and ask them to show their card every time they hear their word. (You can color code the cards for quick checking.)

This is an ideal story to generate not only discussion but writing activities. Following are some suggestions. You may want to select ones that you think will interest your class and that meet your particular language goals, or give the children a choice of assignments. You will get more insightful results if you allow for a few minutes paired discussion on the chosen topic before actual writing, and even better results if you allow students to work in pairs to produce a piece of writing. (If students use L1 while composing, which is inevitable in a monolingual class, don't worry. They will be talking *about* English anyway, and the result will be in English.)

1. Imagine that you are a Plain-Belly Sneetch (Star-Belly Sneetch). Write a journal entry about your thoughts and feeling about the campfire activities. Share your journal entry with the class. Compare.

2. Imagine that you are a Star-Belly Sneetch mother whose child wants to invite the Plain-Belly child from class to your big, important Sneetchstaroo party. What will you tell your child.? (With a partner, you could present a dialogue between the mother and the child.)

3. You are a newspaper reporter sent to cover the strange happenings in Sneetchland. Write a newsreport about them. (See Johnson and Louis, 1987, for ideas on how to teach newsreport writing.)

4. You are a TV reporter covering special events in the Sneetchland. Present a brief commentary about the strange happenings. (For this activity, view some international newscasts on TV and talk about the length, way of presentation and signing off, etc.)

5. Write a different ending to the story, starting a) from McBean's departure;
b) from the moment the Plain-Bellies first come out of the Star-On-Off Machine with stars on their bellies and the Star-Bellies see them..

6. With a partner, write and then present to class a dialogue between a Star-Belly and a Plain-Belly who would like to be friends.

7. Write a new story about prejudice and its consequences.

Use the writing generated by the children for further language activities, NOT the original story!. Re-writing with changes in verb tense, addition of descriptive words, and other familiar language activities are very useful, but applied on the original piece of literature, will ruin it. Students can prepare listening comprehension questions for the class about their journal entries and reports and then read the text while others will answer the questions. One student can read another student's written work and then report it to class.

When working with this and other similar stories where there seems to be a clear 'right' and 'wrong' side (hardly any teacher will find the Star-Bellies' behavior acceptable!), it is important that the teacher refrain from passing his or her own personal values - and biases - to the children, no matter how 'right' they seem to be. Children should be allowed to discover and formulate their opinions and values and express them freely. What the teacher can, and should, do, is to encourage the children to justify their opinions. *"What do you think might happen if...?" "What makes you think that .... is not right?" "If ....how would you (others) feel?"* and other similar questions will stretch children's thinking and at the same time implicitly pass the message that what they think is valued by the teacher. This models appropriate questioning strategies that promote tolerance and acceptance of differing viewpoints. It also raises the sense of self-worth, which is a powerful motivator for learning.

Selected references

Johnson, Terry D. and Daphne R. Louis. *Literacy through Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1987

Stauffer, R. *Directed Reading Maturity as a Cognitive Process*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969